

Shifting the gravity of architectural education

The technical socialisation of knowledge

Shaping change in architectural education

A remarkable thing has happened in the world of architectural education in the last few years: agreement has broken out. Gordon Murray's 'perspective', 'Education for a Smarter Profession', in *arq* 16.4 (pp. 281–85), contains virtually nothing with which I could disagree, and perhaps very little which anyone who is familiar with the current shifting landscape in which UK architectural education exists would choose to contradict. The changing context of recent years, which is perhaps most markedly illustrated by changes in the funding regime for higher education, has prompted an appreciation of shared interests and shared aims. The related issues have been thoroughly debated, the evidence base has been gathered and scrutinised and the possible futures posited. It is a matter of no small significance that the debate



1, 2 'Change is happening [in architectural education]: the uncertainty which remains is whether we can effectively shape it.'



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concerning the need for change has been settled. Change is happening: the uncertainty which remains is whether we can effectively shape it.

Our existing framework for architectural education, which has enjoyed perhaps surprising longevity, is now an anachronism. It fails to address the current or near future contexts in which architects practise and in which students both select and pursue their education. Just as the debate around change has been settled, the roadblocks in the framework have been identified. The historically-derived procedures and policies which constrain the system, which tether innovation and which render a quite bewildering inflexibility, have been dissected, catalogued and exposed. The resulting anomalies have been highlighted and illustrated and their significance explained. Perhaps more importantly, the remedy for the malaise has been formulated and prepared and sits ready for use.¹ The outstanding issue is no longer educational, financial, intellectual or principled: the barrier to change is largely political.

Those responsible for implementing the regulatory regime are faced with the wholly unpleasant prospect of having to revisit their current policy positions and, even more unnervingly, there is a dawning realisation that the status quo is no longer a sustainable option. Once the framework for architectural education has been eased into the twenty-first century, the resulting environment will hopefully be more conducive to the interesting task of designing and delivering high-quality architectural education. With a flexible framework in place, variety can develop and, through diversity, successful innovation can thrive. Without more flexibility, the creative endeavour of those involved in architectural education will ensure some progress but in evolutionary terms the habitat for innovation will more closely resemble the tundra than a rainforest and the richness of life will vary accordingly.

I have been struggling to think of a metaphor which encompasses the tragic comedy of the current impasse. The final scene of the film *The Italian Job* keeps surfacing in my imagination, despite my best efforts to summon up something more literary or tectonic. This scene depicts the protagonists precariously balanced in a bus with its rear end hanging off a

precipitous drop after swerving off an alpine road. The situation had occurred suddenly, quite beyond the scope of their expectation. As if in a blink of an eye, their steady progress along the road had been transformed into a moment of extreme jeopardy. The precious cargo around them is shifting and although they all have some shared purpose they are, by instinct, overridingly concerned with their own well-being. Unable to immediately appreciate their new circumstances, and fearful of making a bad situation worse, they fall victim to the basic anthropological response when confronted with fear and disorientation: they freeze.

This metaphor is woefully inadequate. Architectural education is not about to fall off a cliff, although at a personal level some individuals are facing very uncertain futures. However, there is a way forward which exists and which has considerable support.² Whether those who need to act on it will be prepared to shift their centre of gravity, ever so gently, in order to ensure a mutually beneficial outcome is now the question. Will inertia prove more powerful than rationality? I hope not, as I happen to be in that part of the audience who chose to believe the protagonists in *The Italian Job* would overcome the peril they faced at the conclusion of the film: but then perhaps I'm too easily tempted to believe in happy endings.

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Notes

1. The UK Architectural Review Group's preliminary report, 'Pathways and Gateways: The Structure and Regulation of Architectural Education', provides a helpful summary of the current context, existing failings and possible solutions. It is available at <<http://people.bath.ac.uk/absaw/files/>>.
2. Ibid.

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arq gratefully acknowledges: Karen Johnson, Newcastle University, 2 Matthew Kidner, University of Nottingham, Making Architecture Research Studio, 1

Further to further reading required

I am very grateful to Linda Clarke for her letter in arq 16.4 (pp. 277–78), adding to her invaluable contributions to the *Further Reading Required* event (FRR), which was documented in arq 16.3. Linda's research work, and the wider research of the Centre for Study of the Production of the Built Environment (ProBE), continues to act – as it has done for many years – as a corrective to lopsided histories of architecture and construction that exclude an appropriate understanding of the labouring subject.

I cannot provide a general defence for research that engages directly, largely or exclusively with the interpretation and analysis of technical literatures and documentation. One of the interesting aspects of FRR was the heterogeneity of motivations, interpretative frameworks and positions presented. I would, however, like to respond to those concerns expressed by Linda that specifically touched on my own paper, 'Demolition Figures: The Appearance of the Topman and Mattockman in LCC Contracts 1941–1951' (pp. 245–52).

Linda provides an important challenge to those parts of my paper that suggest that the history of the demolition industry in the twentieth century constitutes some kind of trajectory of 'deskilling', à la Braverman's thesis. It's quite clear why this impression is given at key points in my text, and if I could only turn back time and erase those passages I would – for they run counter to the fundamental argument I was trying to make.

I argued that the building contracts for the demolition and excavation of the South Bank site both represented (as they stand in the archive) and were a means towards (as they were mobilised in the historical moment of their drafting) a shift from a 'conventional' to a 'technical' knowledge. I did not mean to imply that this constituted a process of deskilling. What I meant was that the form and content of knowledge in demolition was being transformed. No longer was demolition strictly confined to a craft tradition, passed from one group of human beings to another, the circulation and limit of that knowledge circumscribed by a complex of material and discursive traditions with their locus confined to the relationship of the known body (a particular person)

to a tool (mattock) or spatial location (topman).

Instead, this knowledge had become 'technical': institutionalised, technically available (to those trained), and integrated into a wider system of knowledge (of machine operations, engineering principles, site management and so on). In Linda's own terms: 'more abstract, requiring less manual skill and a wider range of competences'. It is not a question, then, of 'deskilling' but what we might call the 'technical' *socialisation* of knowledge in the production of architecture. A number of the papers presented at *FRR* can be considered in terms of an attempt to contend with these shifts in 'knowledge', and it is in this sense that many dealt with the social relations that are necessarily determinate for aspects of architectural production. At the same time, it's clear that tracing such shifts does largely occlude the material, embodied, labouring subject in favour of the discursive and, well ... textual! I think that's why everyone laughed on the day when, at a symposium concerned with textual documents, I opened by talking about some photographs.

In other words and in short, I agree with most of what Linda has to say. However, if demolition work in the past one hundred years has become an increasingly sophisticated, highly skilled process, it is also true that the titles 'mattockman' and 'topman' long survived. Those titles suggest certain wage rates, benefits, responsibilities and recognition. But the titles are anachronistic in so far as the relevant skills required to have them conferred no longer have much to do with mattocks or standing on top of buildings. This is one of the reasons why, in the paper, I use Marx, not for empirical support but to provide a particular conceptual language. I would argue that, in Marx's mature work, there is an attempt to provide an account of the historical process by which transformations in production have liberating effects, extending, expanding and 'bringing to social consciousness' the processes by which human beings reproduce themselves socio-materially. But these effects are recognised by Marx as massively constrained by class struggle. Transformations of the means of production shatter the 'ossified' forms of craft knowledge, but nevertheless operate within a social division of labour that is

'petrified' in capitalist exploitation. It seems to me that this is a far cry from a simple model of 'deskilling' within industrial capitalist production, and I would reserve a place for the theoretical language of Marx as useful for interpreting a more complex social process.

I'd like to finish my reply with a shutting down of my own paper and an opening up of something else. I really was only describing a peculiar experience, in historical research, where it is discovered that the document one is using as evidence is that thing which erased the subject one is interested in. I was simply struck that this occurred in an examination of demolition – itself a process which evidences how parts of the built environment are valued but only in so much as it displaces and takes those same parts away from our view. So it was a limited paper, dealing with epistemological questions, and I don't dare try and squeeze further implications from it.

What I'd like to suggest, though, is that the question of the 'technical' in architecture – of the production of knowledge, materials and social reproduction and the development of these within the production of the built environment – remains a largely unresolved problem. While we have some (by no means enough) history of labour and work in the building world, and much (probably too much) history of the formal and aesthetic meaning of architecture, we have very little history that connects these two poles. Is it possible that the 'technical' might forge a link? Is it naïve to suggest that those documents and practices that are underwritten, overridden, ignored, relied on, used and archived, that relay back and forth from the architect in her office and the construction worker on her site, are a valuable location for critical research? Or, taking a different line, is the technical document a 'symptom' of the social division of labour? And would those documents then require a symptomatic reading? These are surely possibilities worth pursuing.

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Erratum

An error crept into the 'Further Reading Required' report in *arq* 16.3 (pp. 197–99). A stray 'but' ('as straitjackets and limitations') crept into the published version of the penultimate sentence on p. 199 which reverses the meaning of what the authors wrote, making their constitutive position on technical documents, specifications and contracts appear restrictive. That paragraph should read as follows:

'The debate about BIM demonstrated not only the timeliness of our discussions, but also the degree to which the kinds of documents and contractual arrangements employed in making buildings – and the precise form they take – can shape architectural practice and what is, and what can be, built. These documents can no more be understood simply as neutral aids to building than as straitjackets and limitations to design. It was here perhaps that the necessity to engage with these documents from a variety of perspectives and disciplinary positions, and to extend these enquiries further – to involve questions of pedagogy, finance and beyond – became most apparent.'

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